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SAFE BROWN BAG LUNCHES

United States Department of Agriculture
Food Safety and Inspection Service

keep food
HOT
COLD
CLEAN

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keep food **HOT—**
COLD—CLEAN

When kids come home from school with cramps, diarrhea, vomiting, fever—the tendency is to dismiss it as just “a bug that’s going around.” Or when you miss a couple of days work with the same symptoms, you figure you merely “caught something somewhere.” But the bug you caught—or that caught you—may well have been food poisoning. And you might have sent the bug to school or work in that innocent brown bag lunch. The following questions and answers will help you pack a safe lunch.

Q. What is the real key to packing a safe “brown bag” lunch?

A. Very simply: good sensible sanitation, personal hygiene, and sound food care. Following a few simple, easy precautions now will save you and your family a lot of grief later. First, cook food thoroughly. If it’s meant to be hot, keep it hot. If it’s meant to be cold, keep it cold. Bacteria thrive at temperatures between 60° and 125° F (15° and 52° C). Food should not be held in this temperature zone for more than two or three hours, counting preparation time. Second, keep utensils and countertops used in preparing lunches clean. Wash them thoroughly with soap and hot water. The same goes for your hands. If you have cuts or sores, use

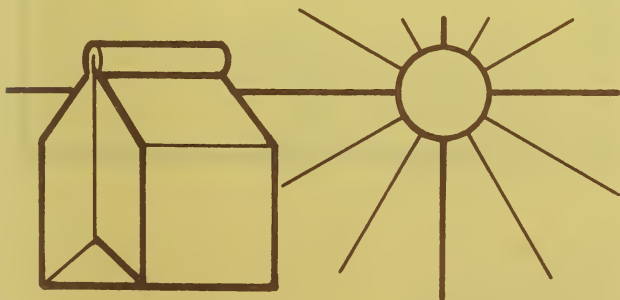


rubber gloves. Also, wash vacuum bottles and rinse them in boiling water after each use. In short, *keep hot foods hot, cold foods cold, and everything clean*. Use tongs or a fork to place meat, poultry, or cheese in the sandwich—not your fingers. Fingers spread bacteria.

Q. How can I keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold?

A. The familiar vacuum bottle is a good way to keep certain kinds of food hot or cold. There are several other ways to keep food cold until you're ready to eat. Ideally, you should put your lunch in the refrigerator—if you have one. If not, put a cold device into the lunch bag: a commercial gel, a plastic margarine tub filled with water and frozen, a plastic bag filled with ice cubes, or a can of cold beverage.

Or you might try freezing certain types of sandwiches though you may experience some loss in quality. Frozen sandwiches thaw in time for lunch



and also help keep the rest of the lunch cool until then. One other thing to remember . . . letting your lunch sit in a warm place (such as on the top of a radiator or in the sun) lets bacteria grow at will. The longer it sits, the greater the potential for problems.

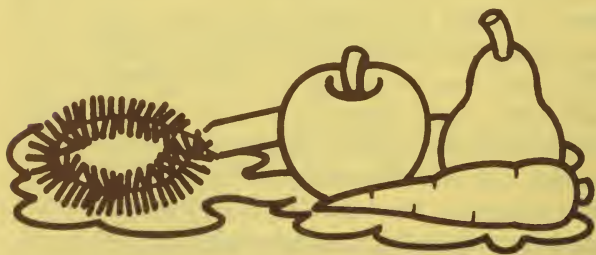
Q. What kinds of meat and poultry products are best for “brown bag” lunches?



A. Dry meats, such as beef jerky and pepperoni, are safe. Canned meat and poultry products, opened and eaten immediately, are a good bet (if the can is sealed and not bulged or severely dented). Fully cooked meats—such as franks, corned beef, salami, and bologna—usually keep very well. In fact, almost any meat or poultry can be used *if it's cooked and handled properly*.

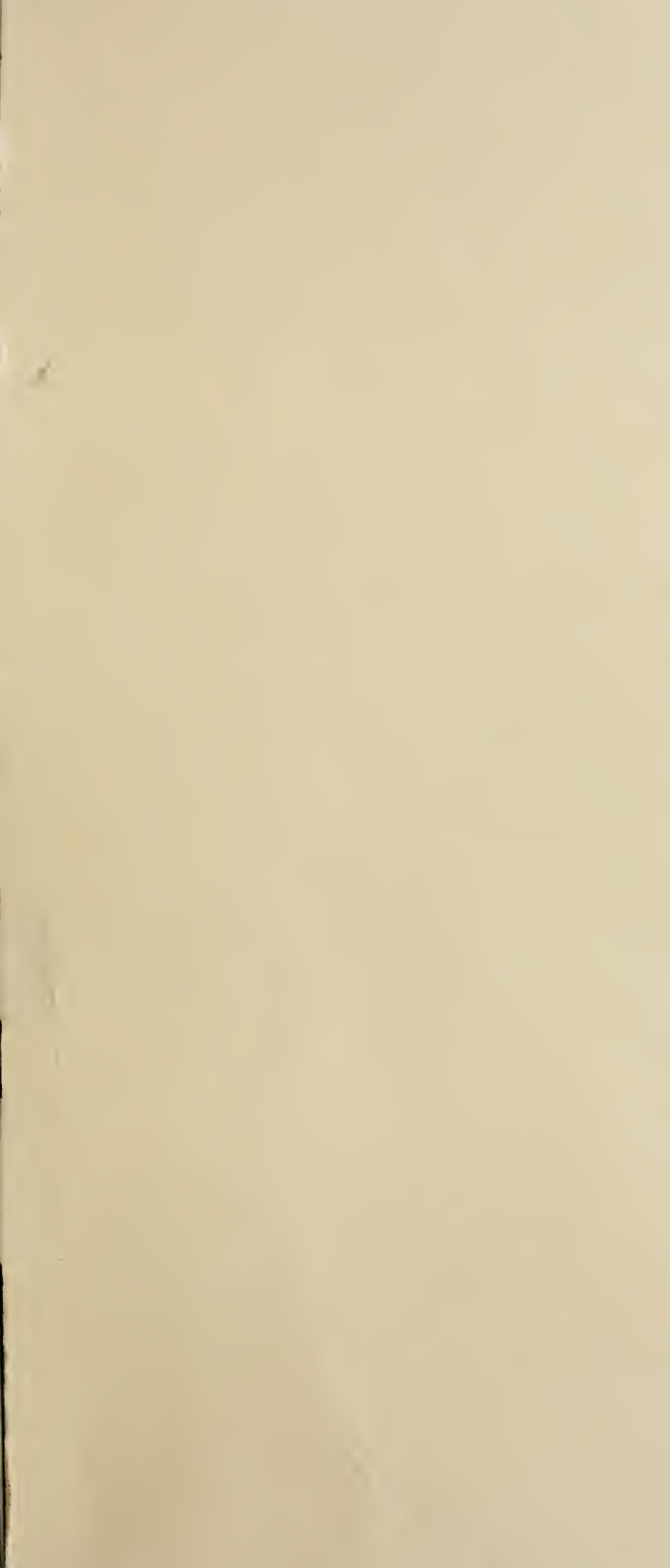
Q. How about soups, stews and chili?

A. If these products are boiling hot when poured into a sterile vacuum bottle, you shouldn't have any problem with them at all. Salmonella, for example, are killed by exposure to 155° F (68° C)—well below the boiling temperature of 212° F (100° C).



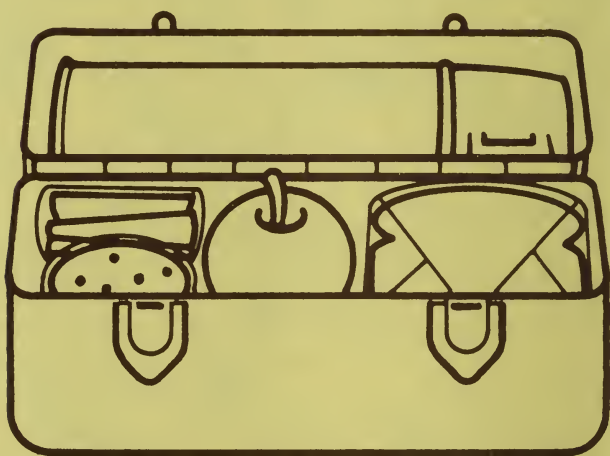
Q. Are special precautions needed with fruits and vegetables?

A. Just be sure they're clean and well scrubbed.



Q. Should I use a lunchbox instead of a paper bag?

A. That's a good idea. Lunchboxes, especially insulated ones, hold the cold much better than paper bags. Plus, a box is easy to keep clean and sanitary. If you do use the familiar "brown bags," however, buy them specifically for lunches and use them once. Don't use bags in which you bring home leftover lunches, groceries, or other items because of possible insect infestation or contamination from food leakage.



Q. How would I know if I have food poisoning?

A. You wouldn't, without thorough medical tests. But if you have severe headache, diarrhea, vomiting, abdominal cramps and fever after eating, there's a pretty good chance the culprit is food poisoning. Because their symptoms are similar, "flu" and food poisoning are often mistaken for each other. Food poisoning is rarely fatal but may affect infants and elderly persons severely. If you get sick, ask your doctor about the possibility of food poisoning. The important thing to remember is—why take chances? You can prevent food poisoning.



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